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Purchased 1826

L E T T E R

FROM

Chas. Walker

A FATHER TO HIS SON,

A

UNITED IRISHMAN,

IN THE

BARONY OF ARDS,

IN

THE COUNTY OF DOWN.

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DUBLIN:

PRINTED IN THE YEAR

1797.



A LETTER, &c.

MY SON,

I HAVE lately received the afflicting intelligence, that you have been induced to become a member of an association of UNITED IRISHMEN in your parish; who in this unhappy, but successful endeavour to seduce you from your loyalty, have given you an example of the purity of their principles in the moment of admitting you into their society, by compelling you to violate the laws of your country; and who have equally presented you with a specimen of the rectitude of their views, by illegally swearing you to a secrecy, incompatible with the purposes of an honourable design.

THE anguish which as a Parent I feel, at this painful desertion, on your part, from those just and loyal principles which I have ever known you to possess; and the tender interest which I have ever taken in whatever relates to your happiness in life, irresistibly urge me to forewarn you of the fatal consequences

quences which must inevitably result to yourself, and your family, from so disloyal a measure; and prompt me to impress upon your mind, those reasons which now actuate me thus earnestly to implore you, to abandon a society which can only involve you in guilt, by renouncing the criminal obligation of an oath which can only conduct you to shame.

IN offering these to your consideration, I shall urge them with the zeal which belongs to a father, and the frankness which becomes an honest man; too happy, if in awakening your repentance, and reclaiming you from the road you have taken, I may save you from the reproach and ignominy that must inevitably attend, if persevered in, so foul a dereliction of your duty to your country!

IN order therefore, to appreciate the consequence of the step you have taken, I shall begin with requesting of you to reflect, for a moment, on the nature of your duty to your country; and next, on the tenor of your engagements as a UNITED IRISHMAN. Not only you will discover them to be incompatible with each other, but, you will find that to be a good UNITED IRISHMAN, you must forfeit the first of titles, by becoming a bad citizen. To honour the king, to obey the laws, to love our country, these are the primary duties of citizenship; and how are we
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to display these civil virtues, and to shew our attachment to our king and country, but by duly respecting, and firmly maintaining, those laws, upon which the prosperity of both depend? The very first duty therefore of a good subject is, by conduct and example, to shew his reverence for these, by making them the measure of his actions. But what is the situation of a UNITED IRISHMAN?—Departing from all these sacred obligations, and suddenly withdrawing himself from his allegiance to both, he raises up the standard of his own private opinion against the laws of his country; and acting upon this feeble, but presumptuous ground, commences his career with an illegal oath, in proof of his contempt and defiance of either. This, my Son, is the relative situation of a good citizen, and a *United Irishman*; how you can have abandoned the character of the former, to assume the reproach of the latter, is only to be attributed to that impulse of terror, which has driven others into your society to save their property from depredation, and their persons from attack; and to this motive I am willing to ascribe your conduct, in preference to imagining that you can feel aught but reluctance in associating yourself with conspirators, and traitors.

BUT it may be said, a *United Irishman* is no traitor: But what is he who conspires against the state but a traitor? and what is taking or
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administering an unlawful oath, contrary to the duties of allegiance, but a conspiracy against the state, inasmuch as that by doing what the law prohibits, it becomes a secret and illegal opposition to the established authority of the nation, which it is equally rebellious to oppose, whether by overt acts, or by such secret and illegal combinations, as, tending to over-awe the legislature, and disturb the public peace, are considered as analogous to overt acts? In the just interpretation of the term therefore, they who enter into such associations, in defiance of the law, or become the wicked instruments of engaging their fellow citizens so to do, by administering to them this unlawful oath, are undoubtedly traitors to their country, and must, if detected, be exposed to the heaviest punishment the law can inflict.

THERE is a duty we all owe to our country; he who violates it, commits a crime against the state. We all owe obedience to the laws; they therefore who set them at defiance by entering into secret engagements which they prohibit, or illegal associations calculated to subvert them, wage war against the constituted authorities of the land, and may, by such endeavours to over-awe the legislature, become eventually the means of inflicting the heaviest calamities upon their country: hence under every wise government, such associati-
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ons as yours are prohibited, as incompatible with the public safety ; even in France, where licentiousness has usurped the name of freedom, they have equally been abolished, as confessedly injurious to the liberties of the people, and to the very existence of civil government.

IN vain will it be urged, that you are only associated for the purpose of obtaining redress against certain speculative, or real, grievances under which you conceive yourselves to labour, and not with any view of disseminating principles of insubordination, or disaffection. Why then assume the mask of secrecy ? why have recourse to actions which only prove these ostensible grievances, to be urged but as a cloak to veil the more treasonable design of overthrowing the constitution ? Can planning the division of property, the reduction of rents, the abolition of tythes, brooding over assassination, shooting at your magistrates, and violating the laws in other atrocious ways, have any thing to do with the milder pursuit of a parliamentary reform, which you profess it to be your object to acquire ? The real friends to this measure are known by their obedience to the law ; their respect for its authority, and their reverence for the genuine principles of the British constitution : the policy of the question is one thing, the purity of their motives is another. They may be misguided
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in their zeal, they may be deluded by the plausible ingenuity of specious but untried theories: yet they seek to attain their end by the empire of opinion, and not by the hand of violence.—While the demagogue goads you to clamour and rebellion, they deprecate any influence but that of reason, and scorn to pursue it by means which are either oppressive, or unconstitutional; such men will turn from a contest, where wounded humanity and violated justice, call upon the patriot to mourn over their wrongs, and vindicate *their* rights, in preference to *yours*. What an afflicting spectacle at this moment do the *United Irishmen* exhibit to them, and to their country! Have they not covered the land with terror? Have they not carried death, and woe into private families? Have they not violated the laws secretly by their oath, and openly, by disarming those associated for the purpose of protecting them? Have they not favoured our foreign enemies, by seizing the arms of those arrayed to oppose them? Have they not robbed the king's military stores? In short, have they not, by a system of unprecedented outrage and depredation, in many parts of the province of Ulster, dissolved the constitution, and forced the friends of liberty to mourn over the necessity of employing military authority to renew its existence, by rescuing the laws from that state of civil imbecility, into which their lawless violence has plunged them?

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Whence those traiterous Committees, which have recently been discovered in Belfast, and those treasonable plans which the seizure of their papers has disclosed? Is there a magistrate around you who performs his duty, but with danger?—Is there a juryman, but who shrinks from his trust with apprehension?—where, then, is the security of the laws?—where is the protection they should ensure to individuals? Look at those sanguinary deeds, which have recently excited the horror and execration of the nation!—In vain the afflicted widow, and the hapless children of the gallant, but unfortunate *Cummins*, call upon them for the husband, and the father, they have butchered in their presence!—In vain the dejected relatives of a *Hamilton*, weeping over his fate, though soothed by the remembrance of his virtues, and consoled by the generous sympathy of his country, reproach them with robbing society, and them, of one of its brightest ornaments! Are these the actions of men associated for a virtuous purpose: or rather are they not the deeds of desperadoes, who aloof from the restraints of conscience, seek only by massacre, and confusion, to riot in the ruin of their country?—Oh! my Son, turn from these midnight murderers, lest connecting you with their principles, they associate you with their crimes!

In the pursuit of an object, the *means*
 should invariably be considered. A just cause
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alike repudiates dishonourable excess, or unworthy ways. Temper, moderation, rectitude, and consistency, these are the distinguishing characteristics of the advocates of a good cause: whilst turbulence, injustice, cruelty, and cowardice, are the prominent features of the champions of a bad one.—To interest the public in our favour, we must conciliate its esteem by our conduct; but in holding out, in the instance of your society of *United Irishmen*, the example of men braving both its indignation, and its vengeance, by the most profligate violations of the law, you silence every claim you might otherwise have to its attention, and retard the redress of any grievance you may feel, by establishing the necessity of first reducing you to its authority, before you can be heard in appeal against it. Thus the very means you have taken, are in evidence of the nature of your designs, and in proof of the necessity of relinquishing them, before you can hope to succeed; your first duty therefore, is to return within the pale of the laws, if your motives and objects are really just; and unless you renounce the oath you have taken, and denounce every treasonable conspiracy within your knowledge, it can only appear, that from choice, you have preferred to be linked with traitors, in preference to ranging under the standards of your country.

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BUT you will say, how is this to be done? can I free myself from the difficulties of my situation, when I have sworn to be secret and true? I answer, you can; shew but the sincerity of your repentance, and the difficulty is over. I know it has been circulated among you, that the oath is binding, merely because it has been taken: and that active endeavours have been used, to persuade those deluded persons that belong to your society, that it is criminal to detach themselves from an engagement they have sworn to maintain. I will admit for a moment, that there may be a struggle of conscience in the minds of some men, who may artfully have been influenced, or forcibly compelled, to take this unlawful oath; but a little reflection will shew them, that it is only because they have not sufficiently considered the subject; and that nothing of doubt can possibly attach to the case of an engagement, which remorse alone should hasten them to cancel; for this purpose, it is only necessary to consider the nature of an oath in general, and of the *United Irishman's* oath in particular—We shall then discover, that those who have taken the latter, are absolved from any presumed condition it imposes, and may recede from it, without the breach of any moral obligation, which either in the sight of heaven, or man, can be considered as binding upon the human conscience. An oath is the most solemn obligation into which man can enter:

it carries him immediately to the tribunal of his Creator ; it is an appeal from the eye of man to the judgment of heaven, and is recorded there, to be answered on that great day, when the actions of all men are to rise up in judgment upon them, before the great author of their being. To him who is all good, such a pledge, then, can only be acceptable in proportion to the purity of heart with which it is uttered, and to the justice, or moral rectitude, of the engagement it is tendered to confirm; the very attribute therefore of an oath, that is, the quality which constitutes its authority over the mind, must be a preconviction, on the part of him who takes it, that the asseveration, or pledge he is making, contains nothing in it at variance with the reverence due to the Divinity, or repugnant to the duty we owe to our country ; for every engagement to man, is necessarily superseded by the higher obligations of moral duty, which inculcate the twofold doctrines of reverence for our Creator, by a rigid observance of those moral precepts which, as rules of action, he has wisely implanted within our breasts, to restrain us from doing wrong; and by respect for our rulers, which equally enforces the wisdom and necessity of submission to the laws.

Now, what is the situation of a *United Irishman* at the very moment when he is taking

ing this unhallowed oath?—what is his conduct, and what are his intentions?—let him speak for himself, for this must be his language. “ In thy presence, O God, I take an oath I dread to avow: I enroll myself in a society I am ashamed to own: I associate for a purpose I dare not reveal: and I seek for mercy in thy fight—how? by violating, through this secret act of resistance, the laws of my country, which the duties of allegiance, and thy holy precepts teach me to obey!” Can any one imagine that an oath of this nature is not an outrage to the Deity to whom it is offered? And yet, are not these the engagements connected with it; and the feelings which naturally arising in the mind, must operate to agonize the conscience of him who takes it? Who then, believing in a future state of rewards and punishments, can contemplate without dread, the consequences which attach to so criminal an engagement? To value an obligation we must respect it. But what are we to think of that engagement which commences with a violation of our duty to God, and ends with a breach of allegiance to our country? Oh! my deluded son, be not the dupe of traitors, and demagogues, who are deceiving you! Return with repentant feelings, to the bosom of an injured and forgiving country; and redeem by the loyalty of your future conduct,

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the reproach which attaches to the criminality of your past !

BUT to press the matter still further upon your conviction. The law, as the safe-guard of society, in certain instances restrains the human will : in others, wherein the rights of society are not invaded by the acts of individuals, it leaves to the conscience of man the regulating of his own conduct, by making it a case between him and his Creator. To the laws, therefore, of society, and to the consciences of men, all human actions are referable ; and by these two standards the test of their moral fitness is to be adjudged, and the validity of any obligation they impose, is to be ascertained. The law permits us to do what it does not prohibit, as injurious to others : conscience restrains us from perpetrating what is hurtful to ourselves, or to them.

THEY, therefore, who either administer, or take, an unlawful oath, (and particularly an oath like yours, calculated to coerce every branch of the constitution) in the first instance, do it knowing it to be wrong, because prohibited, and therefore, as a breach of public duty, repugnant to conscience ; and in the next place they do it for a purpose they equally presume to be bad, since it can
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only be pursued at the expence of a secret obligation to which the heaviest penalties attach in the disclosure. How then, can they imagine they are bound by any condition it imposes, when thus at variance with the only two standards to which the actions of men are referable?—the law proscribes it,—morality condemns it. The validity of all obligation rests but upon its legal, or moral admissibility:—to be bound by it, we must be satisfied that we *may* fulfil the conditions of it:—to be satisfied that we *may* fulfil them we must be convinced that we *can* approve, and that we can avow them; to make it valid it must be legal, to make it binding it must be moral.

ANY engagement, therefore, however solemnly entered into, which the law proscribes, and the conscience of man reprobates, becomes a mere nullity in itself, from the want of every tie by which its performance can be compelled: and consequently, every oath administered by these illegal and unconstitutional societies, terming themselves UNITED IRISHMEN, is equally fictitious, and of no avail, since being administered under a condition neither ratified by conscience, nor recognized by law, it became nugatory and void at the moment of taking, or administering it; and releases the parties who
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have subjected themselves to it from every presumed obligation it imposes, as neither possessing that legal, or moral competence, without which, every engagement is vitiated in the moment of its commencement.

To say therefore, that any spurious oath the UNITED IRISHMEN have taken among themselves, for an unlawful end, is binding, and ought to operate against their relinquishing it, is in fact to maintain, that having once done wrong, it is right to persist in guilt; and having both the power, and the means of doing right, it would be wrong to persevere in repentance. So far from such an obligation being binding, the only duty it leaves upon the conscience to discharge, of him who has taken it, is, to recede from an engagement, which, void in its nature, and criminal in its principle, violates every duty he owes to his Maker, himself, and his country, and calls upon him by every moral and religious tie, to offer every atonement in his power to the violated authority of all, by abjuring so unhallowed an engagement; by hastening to return within the pale of the laws; and by seeking to merit their mercy and protection, as much by the sincerity of his contrition, as the future fidelity of his conduct. This, my son, is the duty it imposes upon you.—And you have now to determine, whether, approving of a conspiracy

cy against the lawful and established Government of your country, you choose to adhere to the oath from inclination,—or, whether, convinced by the arguments I have adduced, you prefer to abandon it from choice, when the power is intirely at your option. I have shewn to you that it is illegal—I have proved to you that it is criminal—I have established that it is void:—the alternative is with you. May your decision be a just one,—so may you prosper, and be happy!

I SHALL conclude with a few observations upon the subject of a Reform in Parliament, which the orators of the day have led you to consider as a sovereign cure for every political evil, which creative fancy can picture you to labour under. Ostensibly, you are said to be associated for the purpose of obtaining it.—But are you aware of the complex nature of this momentous question, which has long divided the most virtuous and enlightened minds?—or have you adverted to the period when you are striving to wrest from your Representatives a concession, the effect of which, upon the constitution, at this period of time, no man can presume to calculate. A foreign enemy at your door!—Invasion suspended over your head!—Is this a moment for reforming the constitution? Is it a time to paralyze the public mind with the discussion of abstract theories,

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when it should be roused, and invigorated, by the more imperious necessity of an undivided attention to preparations of public resistance? To improve upon the wisdom of past ages, is an arduous effort; and where the benefit may be remote, but the evil can be immediate, the attempt is always to be regulated by the deepest caution, and the most timid distrust. Such is precisely the case in the instance before us. To apply principles of theory to the practice of our constitution, is an effort of legislative difficulty which belongs to a season of peace; not only from the effect such endeavour may produce, at any time, upon the government of the country, but from its probable influence upon the expectations, and its operation upon the temper of the people, at this feverish moment of democratical delirium. A period of war and public difficulty is, therefore, the last when a wise nation should be seen wrangling about the quantum of improvement an already happy form of constitution is capable of receiving, when the very pillars and foundations of its existence are attacked. That our constitution may be improved, is an event to be wished; but the endeavour to do it, at this moment, is an experiment to be dreaded. What at one period is wise, at another becomes injudicious.—An alteration which a state of quietude may warrant as proper, a period of turbulence will forbid as dangerous.

dangerous—the temperate and candid advocate for reform then, the more he feels the necessity for this measure, the more he will perceive the policy of postponing his struggles to obtain it, at this perilous conjuncture, when the pressure of national embarrassment should teach him to exert his influence to unite, and not to divide the people, by inflaming their passions upon a subject which the generality of them neither comprehend, nor feel themselves much interested in promoting. And this he will feel to be the better way of enabling him eventually to succeed, by quickening, through the firm and concentrated energy of the country, the return of that peace, which alone can be favourable to the discussion of such a subject. Our present duty, therefore, is to defend the constitution by our arms, and not to attack it with our theories. In the one way we appal the enemy, by shewing we are united : In the other we encourage him to invade us, by proving we are disaffected. It is not within the reach of human understanding to discern through the progress of time, the operations of change upon those forms of government to which a people have been long accustomed. But he must be ignorant indeed, who has not traced in history those evils which have resulted to the greatest nations, from suffering their own internal dissensions to occupy their attention more than the dangers of foreign invasion.

To hush the voice of civil discord—to close the wounds of religious animosities,—these, my son, are the generous duties which a real patriotism inspires; and they are the easy sacrifices which the country claims from her children at this awful hour of universal struggle. Factions have subverted empires: and vanquished and deluded nations too often have had their miseries to ascribe to their idols, and their orators, who have alternately flattered, and betrayed them. In availing ourselves, therefore, of the use of history, we are taught, from the past, to collect maxims of wisdom for the future; and from seeing what public men, aiming at popularity through the means of the people, have chiefly been in all ages: we are led to distrust very much those of our own time, and to be guided more by the result of experience, and our own observation, than the light of their judgment and opinions: at least, this is my way of converting historical instruction to immediate utility. I am an old man, and my life has not wholly elapsed without attending to the conduct of characters, the consequence of principles, and the result of events. Thus, when I hear these artful men declaiming upon the miseries of my country, and the enslaved condition of my rights:—when I listen to them practising those popular arts, from whence calamity streamed upon antiquity, and torrents of blood flowed upon the
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the Grecian and Roman ages, I turn from the blandishments of their eloquence, to pause upon the situation of both, and coolly examine what it is. I carry my mind back to a period when we languished under poverty,—when our rights were dormant, or invaded,—when our trade was fettered,—our agriculture mean,—our lands proportionably low,—and our laws in a state as defective as the general situation of our country. From that dark period, which I witnessed, I carry my mind to the present bright æra I behold, and the magic of enchantment bursts upon my sight! With the exception of the war, which is contingent, and accidental, I see my country free, flourishing, and happy!—at least, with the means within her own reach of being so. Her Imperial Sovereignty acknowledged!—Her imprescriptible rights admitted!—I see the springs of abuse greatly drained—the fountain of her wrongs no longer flowing! As a natural consequence of this ameliorated state of things, I behold Ireland emerging from the darkness of poverty, to the light of wealth and consequence among nations.—Her industry awakened,—her citizens enriched!—When I contemplate these various, and increasing sources of national prosperity, I find them to be permanent, because they have not originated in sudden and convulsive struggles, but are the happier result of mild and gradual efforts to communicate

municate to her, progressively, those benefits of which her situation is susceptible.—In the limitation of parliament—the restriction of the pension list—the repeal of Poyning's law—the responsibility bill—in the emancipation, and consequent extension of our commerce—in the flourishing condition of our manufactures—in the improved state of our agriculture, and, therefore, increased value of our lands—in the independence of our judges, and thus, more pure administration of justice—in the amended and improving state of our laws, and hence, more enlightened system of polity,—I arrive at a series of facts to strengthen and corroborate the picture I have drawn: and they lead me, as a corollary, to inquire, From whence have these blessings proceeded?—From the **PARLIAMENT OF IRELAND!** Yes, my son, to the calumniated virtue of our Representatives, and to the justice and magnanimity of the British nation we owe these rapid improvements in our general situation. Nor are we less indebted to the paternal exertions of his present Majesty, under whose reign these advantages have chiefly been seen to arise, and who has more eminently displayed his zeal to promote our happiness and welfare, than all the princes who have preceded him on the throne. I then consider, that a system of representation cannot be very defective from whence such rapid and extensive benefits

fits have ensued; and that at all events, if ours is susceptible of still greater improvement, I will not, in pursuit of an advantage which is to grow out of theory, endanger the practical comforts it has already insured to me, by struggling to amend the constitution, when the enemy is striving to destroy it, and thus co-operate with him in his attack, by calling off the attention of the people from the defence of their liberties, to the assertion of their rights. While I have an enemy before me, he alone shall occupy my attention. I will repel him first, before I deliberate,—and when I have piled my arms upon the altar of my country, within the porch of her temple, as a tribute of my obedience to the laws, I shall then feel myself at liberty to return to the consideration of a question from whence, perhaps, our future happiness, or misery, as a nation, is to be dated. At present, therefore, to talk of reform, is synonymous only to speaking of favouring the enemy.

This, my son, is my creed.—In these sentiments I have lived,—with these opinions I shall die. You cannot widely err if you adopt them as the rule of your conduct: if they do not lead you to renown, at least they will conduct you to peace; and by teaching you to practise the first of civil duties, loyalty to
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your King, and allegiance to your country—
they will impart to you the best of moral
blessings—the proud satisfaction of an ap-
plauding conscience!

PUBLICOLA.

F I N I S.

